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KANGA CREEK

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KANGA CREEK

. . AN AUSTRALIAN IDYLL . .

BY HAVELOCK ELLIS

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KANGA CREEK : AN AUSTRALIAN IDYLL

I.

THE CREEK was little more than a string of silent pools; the black roots of the sombre shea-oaks along its edge were distinct in the moonlight as they seemed to twist among the stones down to the water. A few scattered red gum-trees went up to the soft far-away sky and a faint dream-like mist bathed the large outlines of the hills around. It was very still. The small vacant schoolhouse stood on a flat a hundred yards from the Creek, with its little verandah and its rough fence. Everything seemed asleep after the scorching January days of drought, and no wind swept down that night through the gorge at the head of the valley or tumbled like an ocean among the hills. No other human habitation could be seen. There were few signs of life; nothing but a distant curlew's melancholy long-drawn cry. Once a native cat climbed the chimney and made his way noisily down inside. Then nothing more might be heard save now and again the awkward flight of a great moth. The strong bright moon sailed across the clear sky and sank behind the western range, leaving a last kiss on the summit of the tallest gum-trees. After that the valley was left to the stars.

* * * * * *

In the evening an English youth had entered a saloon carriage at Sydney station; he was about eighteen years old and fair; his face was of a slow meditative East-Anglian cast. He carried a small black bag from which he at once drew out a book and began to read. In his pocket were several large official documents, including one which appointed him Teacher of the Half-Time Schools at Kanga Creek and Blair's Creek.

Now and again the young traveller looked out; he saw nothing but an immense series of dim vast slopes, and feeling the cool night air he buttoned up his coat and tried to go to sleep. As the hours passed on the train stopped occasionally at some small station. At these moments a profound silence could be felt. There seemed to the youth something heroic and pathetic in the energy that had perched these rough little emblems of civilization on the mountain ledges. Humanity appeared as a huge Don Quixote.

At last they reached the end of the line and the young Englishman followed the other passengers, hastening to fill the little omnibus which carried them into the town. At the Club House he was among those who stood for hours shivering at the entrance, waiting for the Ayr Coach; it was cold, even in January, at early morning on these high table-lands. At last it came, a ricketty, uncomfortable little yellow vehicle which was to carry fourteen persons, including a young woman who arrived late and found a resting-place on the knees of an outside passenger. Gold had lately been found near Ayr and there was just then a new rush in that direction. There was still a further pause of half-an-hour outside the post-office while the mail bags were served out to the various coaches. A grey light was in the sky as the heavily-laden coach jolted fiercely along the rough and silent road between the never-ending rows of ring-barked gum-trees. Once or twice it stopped for a few moments at a wayside inn or post-office to deliver the mails, and a hastily dressed figure appeared in the dim light and exchanged a few words with the driver. At one inn most of the men got down and entered. The young Englishman remained seated. By and by a clergyman who had been seated beside him and who appeared to know everyone on the road came back to the coach and pressed him to have some whisky; he refused. Now and then, in ascending a hill, it was necessary to walk. The young Englishman was faint and weary with the unaccustomed motion of the coach, but he was ashamed not to follow the example of the others and he toiled on with body bent forward and eyes fixed on the bushes at his feet, too tired to think of anything but the next step forward.

Now the road became smooth and the coach no longer flung the heads of its occupants against the roof. Here and there a farm lay back from the road and into many homes that coach as it wound among the hills brought a daily ray of life from the outside world. How many people were there in it? Who was driving it? Were they bay horses or grey? But the young Englishman knew little of these things; he had a vague sense that he was being carried into a new and strange world and he was too weary yet to be more than bewildered.

In a few hours they stopped for breakfast at the half-way house. It was a little silent and solitary inn, with a bench in front, standing back and up from the roadside. Nothing could be seen around save scattered gum-trees and rough fences. The men went inside the house; the women stayed in the coach; the young Englishman after he had had some brandy and water came outside and stood in front of the bench looking at the silent scene. The air was soft and luminous; there was no sound but the chattering of a magpie; nothing stirred save when a young woman got out of the coach below and disappeared momentarily down a curve in the road.

"Well, young man, off to the diggings?" The Englishman felt a smart slap on the back and turning swiftly round faced the carelessly good-natured countenance of the man who had undertaken to nurse the supernumerary passenger.

"No," he replied, after a slight pause, in a cold and gentle voice. Then the others came out and the coach soon moved forward. It had long been broad daylight; on each side the arid and undulating land was thinly covered by drooping gum-trees, and wattles that had long since shed all their molten gold across the land; now and then a flock of cockatoos, loudly screeching, arose with their white wings gleaming in the bright air. At length a sudden turn in the road revealed the little town of Ayr close beneath, and the coach went down the hill, over a wooden bridge, past the little red-brick church, into the broad ill-defined street that ended at the post-office. Ayr was an old town; for thirty years it had nestled down there with the hills hemming it in on every side, and there was about it the calm serenity of age. The

coach drew up at the post-office, and, as the young Englishman walked back past the handsome new Bank to the end near the church he noticed the lazy air of a few men in careless undress who strolled in front of the silent public houses or stores. He stopped a moment before one store styled in large letters Emporium for Fancy Goods, and looked idly at the few pails, brushes, and tins spread about, at the collection of valentines manufactured at Hoxton, and the announcement that ladies and gentlemen might have them addressed free of charge. From a house near the little red-brick church a large fat man, with a bland shaven face, and an immense green umbrella clasped in his hand, was slowly ambling down his front path to a buggy that stood at the gate.

No doubt it was the Rev. John Chapman, Chairman of the local School Board of the Half-Time Schools at Kanga Creek and Blair's Creek; and, after a moment's hesitation, the youth addressed him. He held out his hand and smiled benevolently, but evidently he knew little about the Half-Time Schools at Kanga Creek and Blair's Creek. "I am just going out to a farm some miles off," he said; "if you like I will put you down at our Public School; Williams will probably be able to tell you more than I can."

In a couple of minutes they had reached the neat buildings of the Public School, with their galvanised roofs and outbuildings. Here the clergyman left his young companion, after having invited him to spend the night at the parsonage, and went off with a faint benevolent smile on his large shaven face. The public schoolmaster was a dark, wiry, restless little man: "Come in, come in," he said, "we're just going to have dinner. Queer fish, Chapman," he added a few minutes later. "Pretty well played out, his business. He comes here and gives his Bible lessons, but I don't interfere with him; we're very good friends. He's not a bad fellow. Children are quite well able to think for themselves. Only the other day he was talking to them about David, telling them that he was a man after God's own heart. Then I heard my little Jim's voice pipe up: 'If you please, sir, what about Uriah's wife?' 'Hush,' said Chapman, 'we must never talk about such things.' But children ain't satisfied when their questions are turned off that soft

way; they see through it—they see through it." He had sat down with his legs crossed and his hands between his knees and moved his foot restlessly. The young Englishman felt attracted by this eager, nervous little man, who suddenly broke off: "No, I believe in God, but the Bible's a pack of lies."

"But if you don't believe in the Bible where do you find the evidence for your God?" the Englishman interposed.

"Here!" he returned, emphatically striking his breast with his fist. "There's no evidence stronger than that. If you or any man tell me to doubt that I just tell him he's a fool."

"But how do you know that you are justified in trusting the evidence of your heart?" The young Englishman was fairly aroused; it was not long since he had found his own heart full of ghosts.

The little man was about to retort more fiercely than before, but at that moment his wife entered, followed by the children. He briefly introduced them. "Three more children out, nine altogether, and another one coming." He jerked his head and thumb toward his wife who, with the eldest girl, was busily occupied bringing in the dinner. She was a pale active woman with no particular expression; if she had ever possessed any clear individuality constant work and much child-bearing had worn it away. She took no notice of her husband's remark. After dinner Williams said: "I'll take you now to see your predecessor, Gray; he'll be able to tell you everything you want to know about Kanga Creek; I've never been there myself. Gray's not classified, as you are, he has found it pretty hard work to get along, poor fellow, with a wife and two children. I'll leave you with him for a while. To tell you the truth," he added, "I'm going to write a letter to the *Stockwhip* this afternoon—our free-thought organ, you know. And I have some local notes to get ready, too, for the *Mercury*; we haven't started a paper at Ayr yet. Ever seen the *Stockwhip*? Of course I don't sign my letters; that wouldn't do. If you ever see anything with 'Anti-humbug' at the end of it you'll know who wrote it. Couldn't find a good Greek word for 'humbug'; they hadn't the thing so they didn't need the word. Perhaps we shan't need it some day either."

The dwelling of the late teacher of the Half-Time Schools at Kanga and Blair's Creeks was small and dark and close. Two young and dirty children played about the door. Gray himself was some half dozen years older than his successor; he seemed to the latter a typical cornstalk, tall and thin with very long legs and arms, large feet, loosely hung jaws, colorless face, scant sandy whiskers. He invited them in with a rather sickly smile but with plain colonial cordiality.

"Here's your successor to Kanga Creek. He wants you to tell him something about it. Can he get anyone to take him in there?"

They entered and sat down; the stuffy little room seemed already quite filled by Gray's loose sprawling limbs which moved about in a spasmodic fashion. His wife remained in the background. She might have been a servant-girl once. Her pale young face looked as if it ought to be pretty, but it was already worn and weary.

"I dare say you'll be able to get accommodation with some of the people there. A former teacher, I believe, had a room at John Carroll's. I stayed at the schoolhouse, you know, and came in every Saturday."

"Provisions are not too plentiful out there, are they?" asked Williams.

"Well," he replied slowly, "I used to take some meat out with me on Monday morning, but in such weather as we've been having lately I've often had to throw it away before I got half way. You'll get along all-right. There is no milk or butter to be had, but I used to keep plenty of flour there; one can always make dampers."

"When one is well up in colonial cooking. But the drought's pretty certain to break up now."

"Yes, I guess it can't last much longer." He gathered his limbs together with a convulsive movement and walked to the door.

"Someone has been advertising in the *Herald* for the last three weeks 'Lord Jesus, send rain'!" remarked the Englishman.

"Ah, he thought the Lord Jesus took in the *Herald*, did he?" replied Williams. "Yes," he muttered, clenching his teeth, "that's the old cancer that has been eating into the world so long. Someone to shift the responsibility on to! Rain, wars, diseases, babies, much the same. Well, I must be going." He started up in his swift nervous way. "See you again this evening, eh? Going to Chapman's? Very well; to-morrow morning. We'll get you off all-right." He gave the young Englishman's hand a quick grasp and went out.

"I don't think you'll have much trouble with the children," said Gray sprawling down again on an uncomfortable old wooden chair. "The boys are much the same as all boys who've spent their lives in the bush. You may have some trouble with one or two of the girls, especially that O'Shaugnessy girl; I dont like that girl; she is too big to come to school now. By the by, I've left at the Creek all the things I need out there, axe, saucepan, frying pan—very good frying pan—bucket, all in very fair condition. You shall have them for ten shillings; they may come in useful."

The Englishman said he saw no objection to this arrangement in any case, and the bargain was concluded at once.

"Come out on the verandah and have a smoke; it's cool out there now."

"I don't smoke," said the Englishman; "I must go now; I promised to go to Mr. Chapman's."

He walked down through the darkening, grass-grown street. It all seemed very silent. Unconsciously he missed the immense chorus of locusts that formed a perpetual shrill background to the field of sound at Burwood, the Sydney suburb where he had spent most of the months that had passed since his arrival, and seemed to make the hot still air thrill with even intenser heat. But the exhilaration of the air failed to touch him; he walked slowly with his head down, only looking up occasionally to make sure of his road. His heart was sick and tired; he would gladly have gone back to Sydney by the next coach. What was he to do in this wilderness? But he had nowhere to go, nothing to do.

The clergyman was lying on a couch that ran nearly all round the old wooden parsonage. It was a deep verandah partly closed in by a vine which made a cool gloom where several chairs were placed. He greeted the youth kindly with his soft feminine voice and large faint smile.

"Come and sit down, you will find it very pleasant here; have you gained the information you required?"

"It is not like I expected," he answered indirectly.

"Ah! you have not been long from England. You will find that things are not so bad as they seem at first. It is a healthy life; you will not have much work. You might—I scarcely know—you might find some society."

In a little while it was supper-time; the clergyman introduced his sister, a quiet middle-aged rather prim lady, and busied himself about his guest's comfort with an almost feminine kindness that yet had about it a touch of old-world delicacy, grateful, to his own surprise, to the young Englishman's sense. He got into the large comfortable bed, half soothed already, and fell asleep.

In the morning, after breakfast, he went to a store and bought a few things that he needed: a pair of shoes, a grey alpaca coat. Then he went back and found the clergyman talking to the schoolmaster by the paddock beyond the schoolhouse. Soon Joseph, the schoolmaster's son, appeared with two horses. Williams indicated a mild-looking animal. "You needn't be afraid of Bushman, he's no buck-jumper." The clergyman, dubious of the Englishman's knowledge of riding, said anxiously as he approached to mount, "This side," and shook hands with gentle fervour. The schoolmaster wished him good luck heartily, and they went off at a walking pace, Joseph leading the way, past the little red-brick church and over the wooden bridge. When they were out of sight the clergyman turned to the schoolmaster, shaking his head slowly, and said with a faint smile on his large smooth face: "I do not think that young man will stay there very long." "Well, it won't hurt him," replied the schoolmaster brusquely; "do him good to rough it a bit; he wants something to shake him up."

As they rode over the wooden bridge a young woman cantered by; as she passed the young schoolmaster turned towards her; she was also turning towards him and their glances clashed for an instant and rebounded. His guide soon struck to the right. There were few trees here; on each side of the path the prickly pears spread their fleshy and harsh grey leaves. Beyond the land stretched afar, brown and parched. They rode on slowly, Joseph in front, the young Englishman behind, with the small bag in front of him; he wore a hat and coat for which he owed five pounds to a tailor in George Street.

There was silence all around; the bush was everywhere dry and parched; the strong sun glared down on them, and a great swarm of flies buzzed and teased around. Save for occasional lines of rough hewn rails there were few traces of life. Once or twice they passed a group of two or three human habitations, now and then an isolated hut, roofed with great sheets of bark. Gradually these became fewer, and the path was now a faintly marked track. From one solitary house a woman came out suckling her baby; two children stood, one on each side, holding tightly to her dark blue gown. They gazed up at the strangers with great unblinking eyes, so close that the young Englishman saw the large freckles on the woman's breasts.

The path inclined gradually upwards to the mountains; they passed several hills in the distance; a great tessellated wall of rock struck the traveller's unobservant eye fixed on his own thoughts. About mid-day they reached a farm belonging to Burton, a member of the school board. They found him coming home from the vineyard. He stood with his eyes fixed on the horse's head, returning to the young Englishman's short remarks still shorter answers, with shy sullen reserve, and soon passed on. Joseph went to the side door for some water; and then they pushed on through the parched monotonous bush, which now opened out into gracious park-like undulations scattered with trees. A few miles more and they entered the valley of Kanga Creek. Two little homesteads stood, one on each side, at the entrance of the valley, each with its small garden in front. They passed these, and by and

by crossed the creek near the little schoolhouse; less than a mile further on, at the head of the valley, they reached another homestead, older and larger, belonging to Carroll, the earliest settler in this valley. Here at last they dismounted. The measured thud of threshing came from a shed not far off. Soon a man, having thrown down his flail, advanced to meet them with rough and honest straightforwardness. He was a little man, wrinkled and sharp-eyed and energetic; his chin was covered with stubbly grey hair. He took them into the dark low living room. His wife, a worn-looking woman, yet active and kindly, set before them an immense piece of salt beef and two huge loaves; she made tea from the kettle that hung over the fire in the large chimney. Two tall muscular girls came in for the evening meal. They said nothing, but began at once. The swift and silent decision with which they ate and drank and struck their mugs down on the table fascinated the young Englishman's attention. Directly they had finished they went out. Carroll carried on the conversation with the self-possession and self-respect of a man who has fought his own way against odds. Joseph, who had been hastily satisfying a ravenous appetite, soon got up to go. The young Englishman shook hands with him almost warmly; the day's ride had been silent, but it had resulted in a feeling of comradeship with the boy who had been his guide, and he had acquired a soothing sense of reliance on him. When, a moment later, he heard the sound of retreating hoofs a weary sense of loneliness settled on his heart. The cord that had united him to society was finally severed; now he was to live and breathe by himself, and find out alone the mysteries of an untried world.

II.

II.

THE WOMEN went about their work. The old man still kept up the conversation. During the evening he told the young schoolmaster briefly that he could have no room there, every room was occupied; to-night his wife would make a bed on the settle and to-morrow he could go and look about the valley. Soon after nine they went outside and strolled round the little farmhouse. When they came in white sheets had been neatly laid on the narrow wooden settle, and the schoolmaster was left alone. He partly undressed and at last fell asleep.

Early next morning he got up and walked about outside. Kanga Creek lay among the spurs branching out from the central range. Beyond Carroll's farm the valley, with the little creek threading a path along its centre, seemed to run up into a gully against the side of Mount Bambaroo which stood at the head far away, with its dense mysterious cedar forests. There were hills on every side except where the valley opened out to the south.

After breakfast the young schoolmaster made his way to the other two homesteads, at one or other of which he hoped to find lodging. The three little farms that occupied the valley formed the three angles of an isosceles triangle; Carroll's was the apex; the little schoolhouse came nearly in the middle; from apex to base was about two miles. The two farms forming the base he was now nearing belonged to two brothers, Thomas and Robert Quick. Old Quick had come out from England with Carroll long years ago and settled in the valley to till the soil, breed a few cattle and sheep, and beget many sons and daughters who had overflowed into neighbouring valleys. Now he was dead, and a little wooden cross and a great heap of stones marked his lonely hillside grave. Thomas Quick, who had been out ring-barking on the hillside since early morning, had returned for breakfast.

He received the schoolmaster shyly and respectfully, and he spoke slowly and with difficulty, as one who was seldom called upon to express himself in words. While his wife stood in the background smiling out of her large pleasant brown eyes, he tried to explain that they had no empty rooms. Then the young schoolmaster went across to Robert Quick's farm; he came forward still more shyly than his brother, and his hands nervously clutched and worked round the verandah post as he stammered an answer to the teacher's few questions and remarks. From round the corner a little boy with merry black eyes peeped at the new schoolmaster.

The young schoolmaster walked slowly back to the schoolhouse. He went through the ill-made gate and stood on the verandah; he looked at the place more carefully than at first. It was built of great rough-hewn slabs, some of which were loose and could be moved with slight effort. Inside it had once been papered over, but the paper had mostly fallen away, and here and there were great chinks between the slabs. The place was divided into four compartments, for the two at the back could scarcely be called rooms though one contained some shelves and a box that held the schoolbooks and registers. The two rooms each opened on to the little verandah. The schoolroom contained a table, and such desks and forms as were necessary for twelve or eighteen children; here was the fireplace; it was clear the room had served also as his predecessor's kitchen. The other had been his bedroom; it contained two pieces of furniture only, a four-legged stool and, for a bedstead, eight pieces of wood put together so as to sling a couple of flour sacks, forming a kind of hammock; there were also two sacks on the floor. After he had noticed these things and had seen also the extent of the property he had bought of Gray—an axe, a bucket, a broom, a saucepan, a frying-pan, a plate, a cup, a knife, a fork and two spoons—he sat down at the table with his head on his hands gazing vacantly at the opposite wall. He sat so still that at last three lean mice appeared on the floor and hopped cautiously about. Then he got up and went out. He walked slowly across the stony creek down

by the grim shea-oaks, and along the narrow track, past a boulder of red lichen-covered sandstone, that led to Carroll's farm. The little man saw him at the gate of the paddock, and came forward with his leisurely but business-like walk, and the little clay pipe thrust carelessly in the corner of his mouth. After a few remarks he said suddenly, with an outburst of decision: "I can't have you staying here any longer; you must clear out. I have got a sick daughter in there and my wife has to go about of nights. Me and my son Jim built yon schoolhouse and there you must bide." Then he closed his mouth and pressed his thin lips together with an air of determination, holding the little clay pipe in his hand. The young schoolmaster looked for a second at his scrubby grey chin and then said quietly: "Very well." Soon he had taken up the small black bag and was going, at first slowly, then very swiftly, along the little track past the red sandstone boulder towards the schoolhouse. He had been about to tell his resolve to live at the schoolhouse and he instinctively resented the little man's petulant outburst. It seemed like the climax to the series of petty miseries that had been descending upon him; he felt tired of this new strange life that he could not retreat from, even before it had begun. He walked still faster, and, as he went down by the gaunt black shea-oaks and stumbled over the smooth grey stones in the creek bed, his eyes were pricking and stinging as though they would burst. He thought it would be sweet to be a child to lie down and cry.

While he was unpacking the black bag to see what it contained besides books, and making preparations for the night, he heard a gentle tap at the door. A little girl, with large brown motherly-looking eyes, delivered a neat message and handed him several dishes, round which a great striped blue and white handkerchief was knotted. They contained some cooked mutton and a peach pie. This little attention was pleasant to the schoolmaster, and by and by, after he had eaten a slice of the pie, and it began to grow dark, he lay down very cautiously on Gray's bedstead. It was not so uncomfortable as it looked, but he could get no sleep. He was oppressed by a dreary and profound loneliness; all his senses were

abnormally awake; the bare and unaccustomed walls seemed to press fiercely towards him through the gloom. At intervals he heard the curlew's melancholy monotonous cry; a great moth sailed in through the open space over the door and flung itself noisily against the walls; he watched occasional stars pass slowly over some chink in the shingled roof; he was startled by a rapid and excited clambering of feet in the schoolroom chimney and for a few minutes some animal seemed to be dashing about the next room with almost supernatural energy; then, after more clambering, there was silence. These new and unexpected phenomena kept his senses in a state of tension. He began to feel cool, too; it was summer, but Kanga Creek was in the hills. And once, as he tossed restlessly over, Gray's hammock came to the floor. Here he lay, and as the pale dawn light slowly filled the room there came to him a soothing sense of rest. After that he went outside in trousers and shirt and stood on the verandah and felt the sweet warm silent sunlight that flooded all the land; then into the schoolroom where everything looked the same as the day before except that his silk hat was rough and there was fluff in it as if some small marsupial had found a nest there.

It was Sunday, and he occupied himself with preparations for the schoolwork that was to begin next day. On Monday two little troops of girls came toddling gravely towards the schoolhouse with their slates and bags of books and lunch, all chattering earnestly together in womanly fashion; and then, a little later, shrieking and shouting, came four or five boys. They all belonged to the three neighbouring homesteads; only one pale sickly girl rode over from an adjoining valley, and fastened her pony to the fence. Then the schoolmaster rang the dull-toned old cattle bell that at other times served to keep the schoolroom door open, and the children formed in double line to 'show hands' and march into school. So began the daily routine of the youth's life in this quiet valley. He had arranged that Thomas Quick should take his spring-cart into Ayr to bring out his box and some provisions that he had carefully made a list of, with a pair of blankets and another bucket from Trogg, the Chinese storekeeper. Mrs. Carroll had

undertaken to send what bread he required on her baking days twice a week, if he supplied the flour, and he began to gain a pleasant sense of independence. He made no further additions to his household furniture, perhaps unconsciously arguing that in a life so remote from that he had been used to it was scarcely worth while to attempt any outside reconciliation. Beside, Gray seemed to have lived in some such way; why should not he? He realised, too, for the first time, with a delightful sense of freedom, that mere everyday life could become a far simpler and easier thing than he had ever before imagined. The school routine ran like a connecting thread of commonplace through his life; it gave equability and poise, while it was for the most part too slight to put any strain on the free play of his emotional and intellectual life. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday he was at Kanga Creek; Thursday and Friday he walked over the range to the neighbouring valley of Blair's Creek, where six or eight children awaited him in a rough little schoolroom. Next week it was Monday and Tuesday at Kanga Creek; Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at Blair's Creek, and all the hours out of schooltime were his own. The Carrolls or Quicks seldom came near him; he seldom went near them. So it went on.

In that far valley the life of men was as the life of cattle or trees. There was little gladness there and little sorrow. It seemed even, sometimes, as if life stood still, and the old recurrence of birth and death ceased. Man had come to that new strange corner of the earth, and struggled strongly with Nature, as with Atalanta her lovers struggled of old, and now, in seeming, he had conquered, and they lived together silent and content. Early in the morning the measured music of a distant axe might sometimes float down the hillside; a remote cattle bell tinkled lazily all day long; between school hours the children shouted down among the stones and the shea-oaks in the creek's bed, or perhaps chanted in their play the old rhyme of *Oranges and Lemons*—the old rhyme that had been born under the shadow of City churches and had wandered around the world into this valley of great myrtles—and at night the low monotonous cry of the curlew or the sudden scream

of an animal in pain echoed along the creek. There was little sound there beside. No flocks of cockatoos rose into the air with shrill discordant yell; it was seldom that any gorgeous family of parrots alighted there, to adjust their noisy quarrels or to play at making love. Only at night sometimes the wind roared in long paroxysms among the hills, as though an ocean had broken loose, and with slowly gathering force swept at last through the gorge and down the valley, and once or twice the manifold crash of an uprooted tree came to startle the young schoolmaster as he sat reading at the little brown table, with two empty packing cases set to guard the candle from the blast.

No strangers ever came to that valley. One evening the schoolmaster heard a knock at the door and found a woman outside who asked the way to the town beyond the hills. "I and another lady's camped under yonder tree," she explained, jerking her hand towards a delicate curl of smoke. That was the only stranger he saw. No Chinaman made his way there with the inevitable baskets hanging from his shoulders. No great drays laden with bales of cotton or some small and weighty fragment of mineral wealth ever crawled past there with long team of bullocks. Only, at intervals of three or four months, he heard of the hawker's visit to the Carrolls or Quicks. On Sundays the elder Carroll girls, with their brothers, would sometimes ride into Ayr early in the morning, and the schoolmaster heard their laughter and the clatter of their horses' hoofs on the stones as they crossed the creek, and again when they came back late in the moonlight. Thomas Quick sat on his verandah and read some old numbers of the *Sunday at Home*; and in the afternoon, when her husband, with his little clay pipe stuck carelessly into the corner of his mouth, had started on a walk round his land, and the children were away, Mrs. Carroll put on a clean dress and sat down on the verandah with an open Prayer Book laid on her knees. No religious service had ever been held in that remote valley; and she read little in the Prayer Book, but this reminiscence was soothing to her. She sat there in her print dress, and her worn anxious face became peaceful; as she looked into the soft bright sky and the dusky green

hillside she dreamed of the time, long years ago, when she was with Mrs. Thompson, at what was now Burton's farm, and the days still farther away when she was a child playing in old Kentish hop fields.

The drought broke up soon after the schoolmaster's arrival, a swift tawny red flood came foaming down the creek among the shea-oaks to become afterwards a quiet streamlet. Every morning now, as he had arranged with the Carrolls, Bessie—who was one of his pupils, a pale-faced girl with loose-looking lips and a quick-toned voice wavering between impertinence and coquetry—brought him a large bottle of milk, and he began the day by going down to the creek and bringing up two buckets of water and then made himself some porridge. After that, if it was the day for going to Blair's Creek across the hills, he put a book—Heine or Montaigne or *Wilhelm Meister*—into one pocket of his alpaca jacket, and some biscuits for lunch and a flask of cold tea into the other, and started over the eastern ridge. Sometimes the exhilaration of the fresh air and soft distant sky, the silence and isolation of that strange land, wrought in the young schoolmaster's veins to an ecstacy of abandonment. Once he flung himself down beneath a gum-tree with excess of joy in the presence of that glad warm earth, as though he would kiss the whole world. Sometimes, as he stood looking into the creek or walking along the hillside, he would sing over to himself some fragment of verse. One day it would be *Prinzessin Ilse*, and uplifted by the emotional reverberations of the lyric and the intoxication of the strong bright air he would walk on, scarcely feeling how the track here and there became steep and rough, till he shouted aloud:

Es bleiben todt die Todten,
Und nur der lebendige lebt!

Then he stood still, hot and out of breath, on the summit of a little stony hill. A few spotted thistles grew on its sides with their glossy white-veined leaves, while a little way off on the stout branch of a dead tree a huge jew-lizard basked stolidly in the sun. As he stood there he was only conscious of the dusky

green hills, with the bright mysterious peace as of Beulah resting on them, that stretched, range after range, as far as his eye could reach, that no man had touched, that were still clothed in their infinite robe of sunlight and silence.

At that time it seemed as if he had reached a finely touched moment of life. The simplicity to which he had from taste and indolence reduced the process of living, the strenuous walks across the hills to Blair's Creek, the brief monotony of schoolhours, left open all the highest springs of enjoyment. His young mind, set free by the books he was reading by day and by night, went tracking in all directions the problems of the universe. How many times the dreary heat of that path across the hills, or the toilsome slime of the descent after rain, was made sweet and easy by this inner life which rendered him unconscious of the things around him. But yet in spite of himself the things around him formed an inseparable part of his mental process, and some indifferent or unnoticed object, some mere bush or hillock, became linked to an idea and for ever recalled it with persistent iteration; and he grew irritated that the free pearls of his thought should be strung and confined by the commonplace line of his path across the hills. Yet, sometimes, under the stress of some peculiarly soft and exhilarating flood of light and air, of some wider pulse of blood, he was called out of such concentrated and abstract moods by more concrete appeals from the large nature around him. Sometimes it was the apple-gums that grew on a slope at one part of his way and were lost in the valley; they soothed him with their large gracious limbs and soft cinnamon bark; and for that day his journey would be swifter. At another time it might be the great slow elastic bounds of a large kangaroo across his path and down into the gully below. On one evening, as he came down the ridge, he caught a sudden glimpse of the red roses half hidden in green leaves that grew up the schoolhouse verandah posts and a quick thrill of delight ran through his body. Often after that as he came down from the crest of the ridge he looked wistfully at the roses, but no pulse of joy was stirred. It is only at rare and subtly poised moments that some

vast electric touch of Nature's finger can overflow brain and body with so sudden a spasm of delight.

It was by the development of these new channels of sensational and mental activity that the youth lived gladly without human companionship. He united a strong longing for sympathy with an equally strong distrust of his own power to evoke sympathy. This morbid self-scepticism, while it was mistaken for proud reserve, had rendered all approach to the human beings whose love he longed for little more than a prolonged agony on the threshold of intimacy. At this point of his life he was lifted above the struggles that ended in self-contempt to a new and joyous sphere of freedom. Books absorbed him chiefly. Often he read, sometimes aloud, till long past midnight, and when the Carrolls rode home over the creek one Sunday night they heard him and said to one another that the schoolmaster was frightened at being alone. No passion came to disturb him; his emotional nature seemed mostly dormant during those peaceful days. The year before, a woman's face and form and voice had stung his imagination with a strange, half bitter sweetness; now that desire had passed into a tender dream which seemed to him as the embodiment of a phase he had passed through, and he wrote some verses addressed to 'Ada' with the motto:

Wenn ich dich liebe was gehts dich an?

On his path over the range at the highest point before the descent into Blair's Creek distant twin hills came into view whose large swelling curves seemed the vast breasts of the goddess of that land lying recumbent across the earth. Whenever he reached the crest that brought those mountain breasts suddenly to his sight a faint pulse of pleasure, half emotional, half intellectual, went through the young schoolmaster, and if he had grown tired he was tired no longer. On one evening, during the occasional half hour that he spent with the Carrolls, as he sat on the settle and replied briefly while the old man talked in his downright way of German aggrandizement and the Congress and the unnecessary expense of maintaining a royal family, and lamented that he had never learned to read and had to depend on his daughter for the

news in the *Mercury*, the schoolmaster's eyes casually fell on the figure of one of the elder girls at the point where her breasts swelled out beneath the brown stuff dress. A sudden giddiness seized him; in the person of that coarse unlovely girl the whole unrealised power of womanhood smote him.

It was not long after this that he sat one evening in the schoolroom reading *Middlemarch* on the bench at the little brown table in the corner by the fire. It was August, the evenings were still cool. He had dragged in a young sapling that the creek had washed down, one end reached to the back of the deep fireplace, the other was outside the door; he was burning it up into pieces of two feet long, instead of using the axe. By and by, as he read on, from the midst of the narrative's solemn elaborate texture the figure of Dorothea began to clothe itself with intense, quivering, strangely vivid life. It seemed to become the embodiment of all the latent instincts of his heart, of the old vague longing for love, the fierce hidden yearning of unviolated youth for some larger human thing to reveal its own immense mysteries of freedom and life. All these profound sexual instincts were at that moment stirred within this youth with a power born of his isolation and became incarnated in Dorothea. He read on, steadily and fiercely, hour after hour, to the end. But this Dorothea that he had created, this symbol of the loveliness of love, haunted and tormented him with its unattainable sweetness. At intervals he had seen to the burning sapling and now it lay in pieces of two feet long in a heap on one side of the hearth. He walked feverishly across the little room, diagonally from the little brown table to the back door. At intervals, as was usual with him, he spoke aloud; they were short, bitter, despairing words. With the world-weariness of youth it seemed to him that life had no more possibilities. In all the world there was no sweet-bodied, sweet-souled woman to bring to such a creature as he that chalice of love that he was thirsting for with the old elemental thirst that was first born with the dim far birth of life itself. Only scorn could the ideal Dorothea, it seemed, have of him. He flung himself on the floor before the fire, maddened at the thought, and clenched his hands, while now and then a low moan came from

him, as he tossed round at each convulsive throb of that tortured nerve of his heart in which alone at that moment he seemed to live. "There is no one in the world anywhere who can love me, who can give me the love I want." Then for some time he sobbed. He got up at last; the fire was out; only a faint red stump lay in a heap of white ashes between the bricks. He lifted the latch and went out on to the verandah. It was starlight; the moon had not risen yet, but the eastern sky was pale. He walked down and pushed open the little ill-constructed gate, and stumbled slowly and aimlessly over the uneven ground. As he passed he tore convulsively the leaves of a gum-bush; the strong camphoraceous odour that clung to his hands sickened and irritated him; no flood of thought came to carry him out of himself and to make his step quick and elastic. He walked back and leant against the fence. Bambaroo stood out with its great rounded summit and awful gloom. Then the top of the highest gum-tree became bright; an illumination crept slowly over all the gum-trees and at last the moon heaved itself over the ridge. He felt the unrest of an animal in pain; he came into the dark schoolroom again, and walked up and down, the same torture fermenting in him, till he grew weary. Then, at dawn, without undressing, he lay down in his hammock.

III.

III.

IN JUNE he had gone to Sydney for the mid-winter holidays. It was delightful even to walk up George Street and back through Pitt Street. The human life of the streets seemed so fresh and joyous, and there was such a strange new assurance and elasticity in his own step. Once in Pitt Street, in the bald waste place that lay beyond the Post Office, he saw a lady standing, with a smile on her face, waiting for her husband. She might have been thirty years old. She looked so strong and elate in every large and gracious curve of her body, so full of life in every fibre of muscle and nerve. He longed to go up to her and put his arms round her and kiss her; the life that was in that woman's body (was it love? he asked himself) was the life that he felt in his own heart.

He stayed at a boarding-house in Castlereagh Street, not far from the Theatre where an Italian Opera Company was playing every evening. The Theatre had just been rebuilt; the pale fresh colours of the place seemed enchanting to him, as he sat, usually in the third row of the stalls, and listened to the music of Rossini or Meyerbeer or Verdi. He knew little of music; he thought *Il Trovatore* beautiful; to sit lazily there when the orchestra had started on its gay or melodiously tragic career, and the swift various play of actors passed across the stage, was enough. All the multitudinous possibilities of life seemed to rehearse themselves deliciously along his nerves; all the sensuous potentialities of his nature were summoned in a sweet vague stream, as though something within him stirred and responded to the far-off sexual cry in which music began. He cared little that he could not always understand the story; the shifting panorama of the stage, so close that it revealed all its nakedness—the tawdry costumes, the unclothed arms with their vaccination scars, the stage tricks—only accentuated the music. Even the preliminary booms and

whirs of the instruments in the orchestra, the gloved uplifted hand of the conductor, the playbill, became soon mixed in the same glamour. When the Opera was over he usually walked about the streets for a little while; in George Street near the Market he passed the women who boldly sought to catch his attention, and he walked quickly and shyly on; in Castlereagh Street he saw the couples who glided up dark alleys; all the frank licence of a colonial city came before him, and fascinated him, and was strange to him.

One evening he was accompanied to Rossini's *Barbiere* by a young chemist who was living in the same boarding-house. Afterwards they strolled along the streets and the chemist introduced him to a young woman. They walked along together. She looked up at him at last in a tender, confiding way and said in a nasal voice.

"Aint the moon lovely?"

He replied, "Yes."

There was a pause. Then he felt a sudden feeling of suffocation, an irresistable longing for fresh air, and without venturing to look at his companion's astonished face, he broke away, turning down the next street: "I must go in this direction. Good night."

The boarding house was kept by a pale, pretty, weary-looking widow, who trailed in and out of the room with slipshod feet. Besides himself there were in the house only the young chemist and another young widow, a little woman, always dressed in black, who talked and went about with a quiet, prim, consciously-composed air. She said that her husband had been a sea-captain and that she had a little boy at school. At frequent intervals she had visits from near relatives, now a brother, now an uncle, now a brother-in-law.

A large, coarse, fat woman, with double chin, came to dinner one day. She seemed to have business with the little widow. When dinner was over, by way of pleasantry, she threw a serviette from behind at the young schoolmaster's head. They told him afterwards that thirty years ago that woman was the prettiest girl in

Sydney. That vision of the prettiest girl in Sydney left an ineffaceable impression on the young schoolmaster's mind, and he often pondered over it.

Once a man came in during the evening with a young woman —Mr. Shaw they called him—a fair, good-natured, middle-aged man. "Let me introduce you to Mrs. Shaw," he said, and the tall, rather handsome young woman, dressed plainly, but with rather a gay hat, nodded and smiled, with a careless air, a trifle defiant. They all chatted pleasantly for a while and when the visitors had gone, the landlady, who had whispered with them in the hall, flared up indignantly.

"Now this is what I call disgusting," she said fiercely, with an intensity that seemed to show something of personal bitterness, "to see a married man flaunting about the place like that with his housemaid; the headmaster of a big school, too, and his wife as nice a little woman as you'd wish to find." And when her anger had died down the sympathetic little widow in black agreed.

On the last night of his stay in Sydney he went early to his room, where loud occasional bursts of merriment reached him till long past midnight. When he came down in the morning the room was disarranged, and the air close and heavy, with a vague odour of brandy; a woman's chignon of those days lay on the floor, a neckhandkerchief on the sofa. He experienced a sudden shock, as though he had unexpectedly set his foot in a strange and unknown land. At breakfast the landlady did not appear and the chemist was not in his own room; the young widow in black presided, and looked after his wants in her quiet, thoughtful fashion. She took two cups of coffee upstairs; then she disappeared into her own room behind, whence there came a report of two soda-water bottles; the breakfast-room door was quietly shut, and, standing at the window, he saw a tall man, with thick neck and red face, go quickly out of the front door. He noted these things, curiously, impartially, always accepting the transparent veil thrown over them. Without himself realising it, he shrank instinctively from contact with all that was not in the line of his own shy and solitary emotional life.

Now he was back at Kanga Creek, and the old life of mingled routine and freedom had begun again. He wandered again over the ridge of the range beyond which lay Blair's Creek, or he walked up and down the path his feet had worn on the eastern side of the schoolhouse. Usually he had a book in his hand; perchance a little green volume called *Poems and Ballads*, bought in Sydney, which had repelled him at first, but whose large images and broad rhythmical sweep soon fascinated him; and after the children had gone, and the sun had sunk behind the western hills, he walked swiftly up and down the well-trodden path, shouting aloud enthusiastically the strong irresistible lines. And in the morning, when the sun looked over the ridge into that little valley of giant myrtles, as he came up from the well, over the dull grass, in trousers and flannel shirt, balancing two buckets of water in his hands, a fresh spirit leapt along his veins and he repeated softly to himself:

> Nothing is better I well think
> Than love; the hidden well water
> Is not so delicate to drink.

One day—it was Sunday—he set out in his old grey alpaca coat, and with the little green volume in his hand, on the path towards Ayr. He seldom walked that way, and to-day he kept at some distance from the path; he would rather not be passed by the Carrolls who, with their sisters, might be going into Ayr to-day. He only looked into his book now and then, and walked on, dreaming perhaps, yet always with an undercurrent of attention to possible snakes, and once he sprang instinctively forward as some dry stick turned up beneath his foot and struck his leg. He was going towards a lagoon he had found out; for it seemed to him a pleasant place by which to sit and read. It was a silent spot, with an air of melancholy peace brooding over it. Sometimes the lagoon was full of water, and then it was soothing to look at; but often the water receded to the centre and left a great expanse of dark mud. Down the faint slopes that led to it the trees grew sparsely; and near the edge there lay about great rotten trunks, the abodes of many snakes. Towards this spot the young school-

master slowly wandered with his book. Suddenly he was brought up by a large black snake almost at his feet. He stood still for a moment in admiration of the strong and lovely curves of its body, the perfect poise of its flattened and wedge-shaped head. Then he walked on slowly, keeping his eyes on the ground. When he next lifted them he saw, fifty yards to the side, a woman who lay on the ground. She was lying stretched beneath the slight shadow of a gum-tree, resting on her elbows, a broad straw hat on her head. It was a manna-gum, for now and again she slowly picked up and ate the small sweet fragments around. Involuntarily he turned and looked towards her; she saw him and swiftly jumping up walked away, upright and very deliberately. A moment after he came upon an open book; he took it up; it was a well-worn anthology of French poetry. He felt already a curious attraction to this woman; now he had an excuse for speaking to her. He came up to her and said with a shy glance,

"I think this is your book."

"Thank you," she said, "I left it by the tree."

Her eyes were brown; her complexion was of the common creamy brown Australian sort, faintly freckled and mottled; there were large buttons all the way down her plain and predominantly blue dress; at the breast a button was undone or gone, and there was a glimpse of white, as though she had grown out of her dress, but she was older than himself. So much he noticed, and not being able to think of anything more to say he was about to go away. He hesitated a moment; he could not at once cut the first link that had by chance connected him with this interesting intruder on his domain, and at the moment that he was finally about to lift his hand to his hat he interrupted himself awkwardly, and caught at the last conversational straw.

"Do—do you read French?"

"I am learning to."

These questions and responses were rather colourless. He looked round for an instant, again about to go yet trying to find something else to say. But she had now taken in the situation, and when he glanced at her he saw a smile in her brown eyes and

it occurred to him, for the first time, that she was rather pretty.

"I know you," she said, with a touch of colonial assurance, "I saw you coming out of Ayr before you came here. My school is at Warrie Creek."

This declaration at once threw their relations into a state of more stable equilibrium. When a little later he thought it was time to go he boldly held out his hand and their eyes met and rested on each other for a perceptible instant, almost with a sense of camaraderie. He meditated on this glance and tried to analyse it, while with rapid steps he traversed the miles that separated him from Kanga Creek, negligent of snakes and once nearly stepping into the midst of a gay party of parakeets absorbed in a family quarrel.

IV.

IV.

IT WAS spring ; the men about Kanga Creek were away at shearing; the children were mostly at home with whooping cough. It was spring, and the land was growing glorious with wattles; everywhere the feathery and golden festoons hung lightly over the brown earth. Life with the young schoolmaster went much as of old. He had seen his new friend more than once since that meeting under the manna gum-tree by the lagoon. And often on Saturday or Sunday he had taken a book, to walk to the remote lagoon, to sit on a fallen trunk or to lie beneath the slight shade of the trees. But somehow he could never read peacefully at that beautiful spot; it seemed there was something there that broke in on his self-contained life. Once or twice, when on the point of setting out in that direction, he had even by a sudden impulse turned off to the high ridges on the left. He no longer dreamed vaguely of love; but sometimes, after he had come out on the verandah in the early morning, and washed at the bucket on a bench, and eaten his porridge with the milk that Bessie had brought from the farm, he stood for a moment in front of a dusty iridescent little window-pane which served as a looking glass. Here he would peer in and wonder whether he was as hateful to look at as he had often thought, and he would pass his finger over his young moustache. Then he would glance at his boots that were never polished, or at the old alpaca coat, rather frayed at the wrists and about the pockets. Perhaps he even meditated whether it might not be possible to amend these things. But when he turned and went through the little gate he no longer thought of himself, the bright scarlet breast of the Australian robin flashed upon him with delight as he walked rapidly across the bristly kangaroo-grass over the ridge; and all the careless vigour of youth pulsed in his young limbs by the time he had

reached the little path on the valley side. He shouted in the exhuberance of muscular enjoyment.

The wind wailed and howled among the shea-oaks; the rain poured suddenly and swiftly down; he sat all this gloomy September afternoon of spring on the little bench betwen the hearth and the window. His book was open on the table before him; it was Marlowe's *Faustus*, at the vision of Helen of Troy.

The rain poured eagerly down on the shingled roof, and from the creek came a sound of rushing waters, slowly increasing to a mighty roar. He had reached the awful close of the drama, and with a shudder yet thrilling through him he felt the need of movement, of human society, at all events of change. He opened the door and stood on the verandah. The sky was gloomy but the sudden twilight had not yet come. The creek was now a torrent and swept visibly and tumultuously round the gradual curve of its course, a red brown mass of waters crested with white foam, leaping over the stones and the gaunt roots of the shea-oaks, and bearing down mountain saplings, burnt logs, great boughs, even whole tree-trunks along on its breast. He reflected that he would have few pupils to-morrow, for the creek would not be passable yet; he walked rapidly along the little verandah, to and fro, with his hands in his pockets, gazing down. It was very pleasant to hear the elemental stir and the continuous roar of the creek coming down from the hills with a sound like that of a wind over a forest.

As he turned once at the end of the verandah he glanced up and started at the vision that he saw on the other side of the rough log gate-post, on horse-back, with the large hat that he knew firmly fastened on over a face that smiled, half in embarassment.

"I can't get across," she called out, as he ran down to the gate; "I've come all the way from Thwaites Flat."

Soon she was off the saddle, the reins were thrown over the post, and they went into the little schoolroom. The faint confusion he had seen on her face at first had now vanished; it was his turn to feel embarrassed as she examined with ostentatious curiosity his household arrangements, criticising them

frankly as a connoisseur, condemning them mostly as needlessly primitive. She laughed at the great frying-pan; she looked into the large biscuit tin; she opened the old box that contained the school registers, took out one of the blue-covered books and turned over its flimsy leaves in rapid critical examination: "I see you keep your registers very nicely," she said, in a tone of of approval. Then she went up to a pile of the young schoolmaster's own books that lay on the floor; she sat down on a low form, took them up one by one, read the titles and turned over a few of the leaves. "I must say," she said when she had reached the last, "that I never knew a young man who had such a good collection of books." He received the compliment in silence but with a thrill of genuine gratitude; it released him from the half-ashamed embarrassment which the sudden appearance of this young lady among the naked details of his simple life had at first aroused. He began to exhibit his possessions, and started some preparations for tea by putting the little billy on the fire. And soon he made tea for her and brought bread and butter and a tin of fish, and sat down beside her on the rough form at the table in the corner between the hearth and the window. After they had eaten the host sought to amuse his guest, and thinking of the books with which she had expressed satisfaction he stood up, reached over her head to a little bracket just beyond near the chimney, and took down a green volume, the summit of a pile insecurely poised. Itwas a book by Darwin. Heplaced it in front of them on the table and they turned over the leaves, examining the illustrations. When they reached a chapter on the subject of Blushing she began to read; they read together, leaning together towards the book; they followed the sober scientific discussion of the process of blushing, why such and such persons or races blush or do not blush, where and how they blush, sometimes smiling or laughing together. It seemed to the young schoolmaster that he was tasting a new pleasure. He had always looked at women from afar, seriously, having had no sisters or girl-friends; it was a new experience to realise that a woman was so human, so curious, laughing and smiling with him over these things of

which he could scarcely have ventured to speak. He felt that a barrier had been broken down, and that he had been brought nearer than before to another human soul.

When the reading was done and the green book lay closed on the rough red-brown table before them, the schoolmaster instinctively took it up to replace on the little bracket above in the corner. He stood up and leaned over her, and she moved her head aside. As he sat down, the bent head and the twisted brown hair, so close to him, the neck with its fine down, the curves of the shoulder and breast beyond, and with this a peculiar feminine odour, struck suddenly and penetratingly on his sense. He was oppressed by a sensation of faintness. He found himself sitting now close beside her and before he realised what he was doing his arm was fast around her waist. Years before he had meditated with awe on the divinity that hedges a woman, and now he genuinely wondered at his own audacity. He glanced at her apprehensively; she was slowly smiling. He pressed his arm closer, but at the same time, fearful, and as if to divert her attention, he began rapidly to talk of indifferent things, to compare notes about the schools, to question her about her life. It was so pleasant to sit there; the visible nearness and the vaguely pleasurable play of physical sensation became interpreted as the outward signs of inward affinity, as the promise of a sweet intimacy to come, to which no limit or measure could be set.

"Look here," she exclaimed, suddenly starting up, "the fire's going out; I'll go and get some wood," she said, as he rose too by her side. It seemed very easy and natural then that she should stay all night, and the young schoolmaster had proposed it and was answering her objections before he quite realised what he was doing. She continued to find natural and unnatural reasons for going at once, but she stayed; and meanwhile the night had grown on, and it would be difficult now to seek shelter elsewhere. She became quiet and thoughtful, yet falling in with all that he arranged. There was little to arrange; they looked after the horse together, and then he left her to find rest in the narrow hammock, and returned to the bench by the fire in the schoolroom. The dull light

from the hearth met the light that for a brief time came between the loose slabs from the room beyond. Then they wished each other good night.

For long hours he was vaguely conscious of that opposite wall, of the small window near him, of the great map of Australia—the huge island continent in the midst of the sea—hanging, in the gloom, on the wall beyond. These things mingled together in an unrestful waking dream. At length the stream of consciousness seemed to be slowly carrying him and merging him in the sea. It seemed to him that he belonged to a race of men whose destiny it was to be taken possession of after death by albatrosses. He seemed to be floating in the sea, which was his natural element, and an albatross with far-spread white wings was swooping around him. He feared it would seize him; at last its beak grasped his hand, but it was a grasp only, firm not painful. Then he became conscious of the deep, gentle, tender gaze of the albatross's blue eye fixed upon his own. The gaze of those eyes fascinated and absorbed his consciousness; the beak and the grasp of the hand seemed to vanish. Slowly the eyes merged into a woman's, large, soft, luminous, imploring; and the face was an oval, beautiful, woman-face; yet the transformation gave him no surprise, and he was not surprised when the albatross-woman spoke: "You will be mine some day." "Perhaps I shall," he answered indifferently. Then she pressed his face passionately to her own and said some tender word—he knew not what. And then he became vaguely conscious of the whole form of a woman. But when he stretched out his arms to embrace it, face and form became alike unsubstantial.

He started into waking life; the sunlight was streaming through the window-panes at his side. When he went out on to the little verandah, the next door was open and the room was empty. He stepped up to the hammock and looked down, curiously, at the neatly folded blanket. As he looked down he saw a long hair; he took it up and carried it out on to the verandah, and held it up in the bright sunlight so that it shone golden brown, and looked at it with a smile of pleasure on his face, until he heard the careless shouts of children, echoing across the ridge.

V.

V.

THE Inspector was coming. The children sat in two rows on two sides of the room—the mischievous Robert of the dark bright eyes, the fair deliberate Charlie, John of the red stupid face and broad bucolic grin, his sister Mary, large and gentle, the motherly little Amy with her slow sweet smile, Bessie of the loose lips, Anne, tall, straight, and sullen, in rough brown stuff dress, and beside her the tiny five years old *élégante*, Jane, in her pink little princess frock, and the pendants hanging from her fairy shell-like ears. Jim, the youngest, with solemn portentous face and sing-song drawl, slowly spelt the words from his reading-book, while the others wrote at dictation. The schoolmaster walked up and down the room diagonally from the open door to the farther corner, sometimes looking out for any sign of the inspector's approach, sometimes, as of late he had done from time to time, unconsciously smiling to himself, so that the children looked at each other and whispered, "Teacher's pleased."

It was a day of still and brilliant heat and the sun glared down from a cloudless sky. A buggy passed through the valley below and its occupant would not have observed the schoolhouse if the schoolmaster, who heard it rattling across the stones in the creek, had not sent down Robert as a messenger.

The grave black-bearded inspector went quietly through his work, asked questions of children and of master, made his notes, and inwardly marvelled that the youth had been sent to this forlorn spot. Then he went his way to Carroll's farm through the glaring sunshine of the silent noon. The schoolmaster's spirits began to rise lark-like in spite of the heat and oppression of the day. He was glad of the dreaded ordeal he had gone through so easily; glad, too, to have seen a man who was civilised even though uncommunicative; glad also of the guest whom he expected to-night.

That night the young schoolmaster walked towards the lagoon. It was long since he had met his friend, and he was eager to see her again. He led her into the schoolhouse, lighted only by the sullen glare of a log, and they sat down together on the bench between the wall and the table. Never before had the young schoolmaster been in so restless a mood of high spirits. The wild humour which possessed him dominated his companion. He put his arm round her, and they waltzed about the room in the light of the rising moon.

They sat down together, and he watched the heaving of her breast. Then his hand wandered instinctively up to the large buttons that were rising and falling, and sought to unfasten them; her hand resisted, but yielded to his gentle child-like insistence, and helped in the task. He remembered how, the year before, at Burwood, when dancing, his partner's low-necked dress slipped down, and his own feeling of faintness, almost of repulsion, the unaccustomed sense of nakedness. Now it was quite otherwise. He nestled his head down and with the sudden involuntary maternal impulse which is not far from any woman she pressed his head against her with both hands.

The heat of the day still seemed to cling to the little schoolroom in which they sat together in the semi-darkness, playing like children. Oppressed by the heat she began to unfasten the large buttons; emboldened by the darkness they gradually took off some of their clothing. He encouraged her by example, and aided in the process, lingering, and finding in it the delicious satisfaction of an instinctive desire for nearness.

Then came the suggestion that they should go out of the close little schoolhouse into the open air.

The night was hot and still; the full moon was high in the sky; Bambaroo, with its large and gentle outline, seemed mysteriously near. They walked slowly, hand in hand, to the creek with its pools of burnished silver under the face of the moon. They stepped carefully over the large smooth stones; she placed her arm round him, and he softly grasped and caressed the other hand. Then he placed his arm around her. Each touch sent an unknown thrill

through his being. To touch her, to feel through the thin garment the living play of the muscles of the flank—the steady swing of the pendulum in its socket—was in itself a joy that sufficed to fill the whole field of sensation. This woman was a new gospel, and every movement a fresh verse to the youth's hungry soul.

They reached the soft rounded sandstone boulder that lay, a little mass of brown, on the dull green slope. He looked into her face with entreaty, half wistful, half eager, and he began to unfasten her last garments. She murmured remonstrance: "I can't if you don't too," she said. And she untied the knot when his unskilful fingers were at fault.

The moon was bright above; below, a straggling row of pools, each a great pearl, marked the line of the creek; from the delicate boughs of the tall gums the long pale leaves drooped silently; there was no sound but the occasional scamper and cry of some nocturnal animal, or the remote melancholy call of the curlew; to the right loomed the great purple mass of Bambaroo; to the left soft luminous clouds lay on the horizon formed by a distant ridge. Close behind stretched upwards the dusky green slope, the background on which rested the bright pale forms, inquisitive, alive, thrilling with a pulse of Nature so swift that the Nature around seemed dead. She sat on the stone, and he lay at her feet, clasping her leg and softly resting his cheek on her knee, while her hands wandered from his hair to his neck. She said nothing and he was very still; he feared by any word or movement to break in upon her mood of sweet complaisance. His eyes were bright; a new life was thrilling through him,

"I wanted to bring you here," he said suddenly, "I wanted to seat you like a queen on this throne. It's been waiting for you thousands and thousands of years. I often think," he went on, caressing the knee, "of everything that has gone on in the world since this stone came here. I lie here and dream about Helen of Troy, about Cleopatra, about Héloïse and Abélard, about—oh, so many things. And all that time one might have come here and seen everything as it is now. I've almost got to think that this stone is the only ancient thing and the only living one. Perhaps

it is as old and unchanged as anything in this old land. It's so smooth now with no frost to hurt it, and not much rain. It has been here so long. And now you are the highest thing that it ever touched. It has never felt anything before so fair and soft."

He wanted to prolong this moment; he talked on at random; his bright eyes and excited face were turned up to hers. There was silence in the night; the large, clear moon sailed on above; below, the youth lay entranced in the fragrance of the woman's body; afar, very far, sounded now and again the slow melancholy sobs of song, the sharp cries of pain, the mysterious ways of Nature among her children, slaying some, and therewith feeding others.

They were silent now. He stroked her knee caressingly. Then he dared impulsively to lift his lips, to leave a few soft shy kisses. He looked up, then, with a glance of inarticulate appeal. She stooped towards him, a smile of delight hovering on her lips.

"How beautiful your eyes are!" and she kissed them both softly.

"And yours," he said, "are so bright, and your cheeks," and he pressed his own against them. And so for some minutes, with arms clasped around each other, they remained silent and absorbed in one kiss.

Faint and far, out of the silence, there came the sound of horses' hoofs. Her ear caught it first, and she suddenly took hold of his shoulder, exclaiming nervously: "What's that?" The rhythmic beat of the hoofs slowly, surely approached, the steady tramp of an inevitable fate. "It must be Charlie, who went into Ayr today," he said, after an interval. They swiftly slipped into their garments, ran up and behind the ridge, and listened intently to the tramp of the hoofs that now tumbled loudly and irregularly among the loose stones in the creek, to grow faint again and remote. Then they both went back, silent and shamefaced, to the schoolhouse.

It seemed as though a gate of Paradise, left ajar, had swung to.

VI.

VI.

THE young schoolmaster through the hot November days languidly submitted to the routine of his daily tasks. There were the same walks through the coarse kangaroo-grass, over the hills, along the gorges by the smooth-limbed apple gums, the lessons and classes, the entries in the registers, the weary walk back in the heat to fling himself down on the little bed, or to throw off his clothes and stir his feet in the cool delicious water. These things were the same.

Yet he himself was no longer altogether the same. He was less absorbed in the quiet intoxication of his own abstract dreams, less ready to be stirred by the stimulus of pure beauty around him. He no longer stood among the hills as in the earlier season, lost in the long sunny silences that were but heightened and enriched by some stray remote sound that floated through them, some measured thud of the threshing flail or faint tinkle of ring-barker's axe, coming one could not say whence. Words and tones, touches, lingering odours, fragmentary visions, came back to him again and again, perpetually, whatever he might be doing. These reminiscences thrilled him, yet their iteration grew wearisome and irritating at length. It was scarcely pleasure and not altogether pain.

In these days, as in the intervals of drudgery he went about his little household avocations, they no longer hinted to him the exhilarating simplicity and joyousness of life. They called up questioning thoughts concerning what she was doing over there towards the east. Each act of his daily life seemed to have a thread tugging at it, and he half knew, yet was never quite sure, what movement was taking place at the other end of the thread. As he went down in the morning with his bucket for water at the creek he knew that she too might be going down to her

creek, a larger one than his, in her loose dressing-gown, to take a hasty dip in the pool beneath the shea-oaks. For the most part their lives ran parallel, and each moment brought for each the same occupation. There was always a companion by his side, and yet a companion whose constant imaginary presence he would try to fling off, like the obsession of some verse or line that perpetually repeats itself in the memory.

One thought constantly beset him, the image of that smooth sandstone boulder. He had avoided the spot ever since the unforgettable night that had sunk in the clash of hoofs, yet the vision of that stone haunted him, and possessed him with the desire to see it, to sit upon it. He was for ever longing to wander across the creek, to that stone, for ever repressing the longing. At last, one evening after sunset, when the stars were scarcely out but the moon was over the hill, he found himself on the other side of the creek, walking up the slope, in the silent subdued light.

There, as ever, lay the lichened stone. He was tormented by the desire to sit on that stone as she had sat, and yet distracted by the foolishness of his desire. Vivid memories crowded back, the soft flesh, all the fragrance of womanhood for lonely youth. He was about to fling himself down and kiss the smooth stone.

But suddenly he turned away and went swiftly down the slope over the loose stones in the creek's bed. The pride and reticence of boyhood, self-contained and self-centred, were as yet beaten down by no irresistible thrust of passion. His green youth still rigidly bound the crimson spike in the blossoming rose of love. The spirit of boyhood was still strong against the destinies of life, suspicious of easy self-abandonment, aloof from the irrational cry of instinct which belongs not to the person but the race; the day of love had yet scarcely dawned.

As he paced up and down the verandah he stopped to look wistfully at the heavy mass of Bambaroo standing out gloomily in the night. It seemed to be expanding in the darkness and pressing towards him.

VII.

VII.

THE Christmas holidays were approaching, and the young schoolmaster was to leave Kanga Creek, not for his holidays but for ever. His father had written from England that a passage home had been taken for him in the ship *St. Vincent*, which would sail from Sydney immediately after Christmas. He was nearly beside himself with excitement. Now, at last, his ambitious dreams were to be realised. He would go home, work hard, win for himself a place in the world.

That was certainly the strongest impulse within him. Yet his life had become more complex of late, and his career no longer seemed to him, as it had seemed six months before, a burden to be lifted with a light heart, and borne as easily as he bore the bucket from the well. Now there was a certain heaviness at his heart, a dull tangle of emotions which he could not unravel, and had no inclination to try to unravel. He was beginning to know the conflict of instincts which as they develop fetter each other's actions and make our deeds no longer merely instinctive but heroic or unheroic.

He walked up and down by the lagoon waiting. It was here that he had first spoken to her, and now he had come to say good-bye. As he walked rapidly up and down, filled with the new tumult of feverish thoughts, his eyes seemed to fall constantly on a dead tree he had often seen before, a tragic tree flinging out two bare gaunt arms, as though immobilised in the agony of some deadly stroke. In after years that pathetic vision of arrested life always came to mingle half absurdly—perhaps only half absurdly—with the memory of this meeting, with, indeed, the entire memory of this episode in his life.

The lagoon lay with its faintly sloping edges, peaceful and silent as ever, the unnatural peace and silence as of another world.

He sat down, with a sense of oppression, on one of the fallen trunks that lay about, until the sharp crackle of dry sticks afar made him turn to meet the approaching figure. There was the same old Gainsborough hat, the same long blue princess dress clinging loosely to the tall figure that came striding lithely over the elastic soil.

He rose and they met, with the self-conscious restraint that never quite left their meetings now, and they sat down side by side on the log, while he told briefly all that had happened, and how he had sent in his resignation and was now come to say good-bye. She asked him about his plans with the same frank curiosity as on her first visit to the Creek when she inspected his household arrangements, and he answered all her questions.

As they talked side by side the new defiance that had lately hardened within him began to melt. A flood of memories came back, in which this woman's form was deliciously mingled. As the hour approached for parting he slipped his arm around her waist and drew her towards the spot where the manna-gum stood. She laughed as though she divined the thoughts that stirred him.

"Do you know," she said, after a little pause, holding his arm and looking at him, "I think you are just a child."

She smiled slowly a serious almost maternal smile. He felt as though he had been judged and sentenced. Once more he began to freeze into an awkward sullenness which all her efforts to be cheerful failed to thaw.

When at last they bade each other goodbye they only shook hands, heartily but perhaps with a little embarrassment. With his last glance he saw that the eyes in her uplifted face were glistening with unshed tears. Then as he walked away a great desire came to him to throw his arms around her and kiss her. But it was too late.

VIII.

VIII.

'ANTI-HUMBUG' Williams ran out from his schoolhouse door as he saw his young acquaintance alight from Quick's spring-cart.

"You're a brick!" he exclaimed, emphatically slapping the youth's shoulders, "a regular brick! The inspector told me they ought never to have sent you to such an hole, and I may tell you now that Chapman has been expecting you to throw it up ever since you went out. Well," he went on as he drew his guest into the parlour, chasing out a few of his children in order to gain space and silence, "and so you're going to leave us for good, and be off to the old country again; I dare say you're right. Australia is pretty much played out. Things are not what they were when I came out. There'll be a bust-up some day, mark my words. Droughts and theology, deserts and dry bones, that will undo the place. What would old Buckle have said? Curious action of the climate, eh? But we brought the virus with us from the old land. *Coelum non animum.*"

During dinner Williams drew out the youth regarding his future movements: "So you think of going in for the law? I don't know that you could do better. It's the path to open a career for young talents. I was going in for the law once but my health broke down so they sent me out here—thirty years ago now. Well, perhaps you won't regret the time you've spent in Australia when you've got your chambers in some old court in the Temple."

The younger man rose, for he had various matters to settle in Ayr before the coach left. When he came back a few hours later out of the hot dusty road, he found the schoolmaster asleep over the *Stockwhip* with his head on his arms, and a jug of shandy gaff beside him. The youth refrained from rousing him; but as

the coach rumbled heavily off, his last vision of Ayr was a glimpse of the wiry little man running down the street and waving his hat in farewell.

At Sydney, instead of seeking quarters in Castlereagh Street, he went to a boarding-house in the corner of Wynyard Square. It was a highly respectable establishment, even patronised by distinguished missionaries from Pacific islands; after breakfast every morning a gaunt young Scotchman offered up a long prayer in which with much fervent repetition he would insist that all our righteousness is but as filthy rags. The young schoolmaster adapted himself to the ways of the place with his usual calm tolerance of everything that had no hold on his own inner life, and made as little attempt to flee from the Scotchman's filthy rags at this house as from the young woman's chignon at the other.

In this brief camping-space on the road of life he lived as in a dream, making no attempt to reconcile the haunting thoughts of yesterday with the eager thoughts of to-morrow. On the morning after his arrival he strolled along the wharves, into the Botanic Gardens, the Public Library, the long meandering curves of George Street, round by the University, bidding goodbye to his old haunts. On his way back he dropped in at his barber's, an old man in George Street to whom he had often been before. "And so you're going home? To live at Croydon again? Ah, Croydon!" exclaimed the old man, "Ah, dear; many's the time I've eaten walnuts at Croydon Fair. All done away with now, is it? Ah, dear, dear. Yes, the happiest days of my life were spent at Croydon, long before you were born. Ah, Croydon Fair. You don't get such walnuts out here; dried up things. Ah, dear, dear." And he left the chattering old man lost in memories to return to his room in Wynyard Square. As he looked out of the window at the hard bright sunlight stretching far along the street opposite, the old barber's mood of reverie seemed to find an echo in him, and the child of the north gazed for the last time, half absently, half wistfully, at the things that were vanishing from his sight.

The leisurely voyage in a sailing ship gave him time to review his experiences. He associated a little with the other passengers,

and more often quietly observed them: the silent suspicious clergyman stealing about with slippered feet; the jovial, red-faced priest returning after a long life spent in the bush, with the bishop's Latin letter in his pocket, to visit old Tipperary once more; the hot-eyed mate carrying on an intrigue with the second-class passenger who occupied a cabin alone with her little child; the grammar-school master eager to see for himself the strange beautiful old country described by Dickens and Washington Irving; the graceful Irishwoman, pure of heart and free of tongue, sometimes desiring to thrust a skewer through that indiscreet member; the lanky lad who was going to Edinburgh to study medicine and the clergyman's daughter, dark and bright-eyed, who crept in together between the life-boats to spend long evening hours. He noted all these things, but they were only the setting to his own thoughts which went back, again and again, to Kanga Creek. He knew where she was now; he could picture it all; the town on the Hawkesbury where her father was mayor, and her daily life there; household work in the morning, perhaps cleaning a grate or preparing dinner; then an hour's singing at the piano; in the afternoon, most likely, a canter on horseback with her brothers, and in the evening, may be, a dance to which her friends would be called in—the bank manager, no doubt, the surveyor and the solicitor's clerk—and she would be whirled round in a waltz, flushed and delighted, on the arms of one of these fellows who would then take her out to the cool verandah where she would bury her hot face in the frozen sweetness of a great slice of melon as she listened to his pretty speeches. Oh, he knew it all! She thought him a child, and as an inexperienced child he had behaved. And she lived in a cheerful, easy-going little world from which he was aloof, and yet was filled with resentment at his aloofness. He clenched his fists in his ulster pockets and pressed the nails into the flesh as he walked rapidly up and down the poop, striving to forget, to forget, fixing his thoughts persistently on the future.

As the ship cut swiftly through the great blue foam-edged waves his thoughts were pressing into the future, reaching forward to the time when, as he could not know, he would look

back to the days that were past as to the sweetest thing that life could give, when he would thirst for the strange solitudes that the black man has left and the white man has not yet taken for his own, and where the mystery of the early world is still alive, for the great silvery gums bursting out of their tattered garments of bark, for the tremulous fragrant gold of the drooping wattles in spring.

* * * * * *

All this was long ago. A succession of teachers have kept school at Kanga Creek since these things happened. And the pale young man with the tight lips who is now schoolmaster at the Creek knows nothing of any alphabet of love once taught in that place. He works up his school, he drudges on as he awaits the inspector's visit, he looks ambitiously forward to the promotion which will some day deliver him from the lonely and hated bush; to this end he works in schoolhours and out. Perhaps sometimes an intangible presence, the echo of a feminine voice, the rustle of a woman's clothing, the faint fragrance of a woman's body, may come out of the past to haunt the old schoolhouse and make the plodding schoolmaster restless, he cannot tell why. It may be only the breath of Nature expanding the rosebuds on the verandah posts or fashioning the little breasts of the girls whose prattling laughter arises from between the saplings below. But however that may be, surely in the autumn nights the great wind still tumbles among the hills like a sea, bearing into the valley the far rumour of the wide world outside, and the giant myrtles still mount high to be kissed by the rising moon, and the flowers spread abroad their prodigal loveliness. And the little birds still play at their early games of love.

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